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ABSTRACT

In the year 2000, news and entertainment programs dedicated a great deal of comedic attention to the presidential election. Taking a Uses and Gratifications approach, this paper examines the role of comedy among the young electorate (undergraduate students at a Texas university). It concludes comedic programs, while popular, are among many sources young people use to learn about the candidates. The paper also examines motivations driving young people to non-traditional sources and finds motivation can significantly affect the impact of jokes. (Contains 39 references and 8 tables of data.) (Author/RS)

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THE COMEDY CAMPAIGN:
The Growing Influence of Humor in Presidential Elections

A Uses and Gratifications Approach

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ABSTRACT

In the year 2000, news and entertainment programs dedicated a great deal of comedic attention to the presidential race. Taking a Uses and Gratifications approach, the author examines the role of comedy among the young electorate. She concludes comedic programs, while popular, are among many sources young people use to learn about the candidates. The author also examines motivations driving young people to non-traditional sources and finds motivation can significantly affect the impact of jokes.

THE COMEDY CAMPAIGN:
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In the year 2000, comedy played a highly publicized role in the presidential election. Not only did candidates make traditional stops along the campaign trail, they hit the talk-show circuit as well. Appearances on daytime shows like "Oprah", and late-night comedy shows such as "The Tonight Show" with Jay Leno and "Late Night" with David Letterman, became commonplace. Cable and network programs including "The Daily Show" and "Politically Incorrect" dedicated a great deal of airtime, and comedic attention, to the presidential race. Since the start of the campaign, many Americans have begun paying attention to what comedians have to say about the electoral process.

The shift from serious issues to shtick has received widespread coverage in the national news media. Of particular interest has been a recent survey by the Pew Center For The People & The Press (2000). During the campaign, Pew researchers surveyed Americans of all ages to find out where they were getting their political news. When they broke their results out by age, researchers found adults under age 30 say they regularly (24%) or sometimes (55%) "learn information about the candidates or their campaigns" from comedy programs and other non-traditional media outlets, like MTV. (The Pew report, *called Audiences Fragmented & Skeptical*, is available online at the center's web site: www.people-press.org).

Editorial writers, journalists, media critics, and political scholars have raised concerns over the Pew Center's findings. Many of their discussions and writings have one thing in common – they fear the continuing trend toward "infotainment" in the mass media limits serious discussion on substantive political issues. They also have more long-term worries about what "infotainment" bodes for the future of democracy (especially among young Americans). Much of their concern centers on the assumptions that: (1) information young people glean from non-traditional sources might affect their opinions about candidates (and possibly their voting behavior); and (2) young people are using these sources as their *primary* source of campaign information.

Is this true? Are the Pew Center's findings proof of a crisis in American democracy? The author believes some critics may be jumping to conclusions based upon information not yet in evidence. Many questions remain unanswered. While the majority of young people report learning regularly or sometimes from non-traditional sources, has this become their *primary* source of information, or is it just one of many? Are young people making decisions (or forming opinions) based on what they're learning from comedic talk shows, or are these shows simply reinforcing existing attitudes? What specific factors (if any) affect the opinion formation process? Conclusions are unreachable without further study.

The author examines these questions in the present study. Before jumping ahead to the results, it is important to briefly describe the development of infotainment in the mass media and discuss theoretical concerns underpinning this research.

THE INFOTAINMENT TREND: POP CULTURE & POLITICS

So, what exactly is infotainment? As its name suggests, it's a type of media activity that combines the need to be informed with the need to be entertained:

> Infotainment ... incorporates political-informative elements in entertainment programs and entertainment aspects in traditionally informative programs. It is the domain of 'soft news' wherein the factual meets the emotional and is 'sauced' with dramatic elements of conflict, scandal, and gossip. (Brants & Neijens, 1988, p. 152)

According to Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), myriad changes (in the media and society as a whole) have contributed to its development. One thing is clear – modern technology plays a key role. According to Ruggerio (2000), as emerging technologies provide us with a wider range of source selection and channels of information, "individuals are selecting a media repertoire in those areas of most interest." (p. 19) From computers to cable to satellites, technology allows us to bring a staggering variety of news, information, and entertainment into our homes. This proliferation of sources/channels has had profound effects on existing media.

Modernization isn't the only cause of the media evolution, however. In order to attract "consumers" in a highly-competitive, commercial environment, media have been forced to adapt. They've done so by creating new kinds of programming, designed to attract an ever-fragmented audience. In the process, the once-clear line between entertainment and news has become blurred (Barnhurst, 1998; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Brants & Neijens, 1998). News programs focus more frequently on human interest stories. Hollywood celebrities are news. Live-action programs reveal the lives of doctors and police officers – not to inform as much as to entertain. Instead of

coming from the imaginations of writers, dramatic programs are now frequently "ripped from the headlines." News of the day has become fodder for the joke mill in comedy shows. New "hybrid genres" (frequently called infotainment) have evolved in both print and broadcast media.

Pop Culture & Politics:

Perhaps nowhere has the infotainment trend gained more attention than in the study of politics. Thanks (in part) to this trend, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) say America has reached its "Third Age" of political communication. The phenomenon is not purely American, however. In their study of infotainment's effects on politics in the Netherlands, Brants and Neijens (1998) say the style of programming in that country (and others) has also become increasingly "informal, personal, and open, meant to entertain and present a picture of the politician as being a human being." (p. 153) Researchers have discussed the impact of infotainment in other countries as well. No matter which country it is studied in, however, scholars commonly refer to it as an "Americanized" version of political discourse.

According to Barnhurst (1998), the evolution towards entertainment fare is especially notable in the news media, where high-tech sets, flashy graphics and new-aged journalists create a sense of showmanship:

> American journalism in general – and political news in particular – has become less focused on events and facts and more concentrated on analysis and interpretation... increasing emphasis on the journalists themselves. (p. 202)

In the past decade, there has been a demonstrable shift in both the style and substance of information disseminated by traditional news providers. Brants and Neijens (1998)

call it a shift from "programs in the public interest to programs the public is interested in." (p. 150)

The news media aren't the only ones contributing to the infotainment trend. Increasingly, political parties and candidates are trying to win voters in a "nonpolitical way" or in "nonpolitical" program genres, by "concentrating on communicating the personal qualities of candidates" (Brants & Neijens, 1998, p. 150). Many scholars and critics point to Bill Clinton's 1992 saxophone-playing appearance on "Arsenio Hall" as a pivotal moment in the evolution of infotainment. Also notable that same year was Ross Perot's decision to announce his intention to run on a "Larry King Live". (Let us not forget, however, that much earlier – and long before becoming president – Ronald Reagan made a name for himself as a Hollywood actor.) The comedic aspects of the 1996 election are equally well documented.

As noted earlier, the tradition continued in the 2000 presidential election when, much to the delight of American audiences, front-runners George W. Bush and Al Gore made high-profile appearances on several late-night talk shows. To further complicate matters, political jokes by talk show hosts were regularly featured on network news programs (like NBC's "Today Show"). "Tonight Show" host Jay Leno appeared on "Larry King Live" with CBS News Anchor Dan Rather to discuss his perspective on the "comedification" of politics.

The "Infotainment" Scare:

Given the de-politicization of the political process, should one be concerned for the future of American democracy? This is, of course, the key question on the minds of

politicians, social elites, media scholars, and many cultural critics. The "pop culturization" of politics has created somewhat of a moral panic in certain circles (van Zoonen, 1998). As Barnhurst says:

> These measurements of media content and public opinion hint at fundamental change in the political atmosphere: citizens attenuated into measurable audiences and consumers: politics commodified into beauty pageant cum talent show: journalists transmogrified into masters of ceremony, celebrity judges and measurers of the public will. The prospect might be frightening indeed if these measurements could be taken seriously. (p. 203)

Is the infotainment trend a threat to American politics? Some say yes, some say no. There are those who believe America is going through a "crisis" of democracy. Democratic Theory suggests democracy will not work without a well-informed, active, participating citizenry. There is no doubt, in the modern age, media play a dramatic role in the process by funneling relevant information to the public about issues on the political agenda. Brants and Neijen (1998) suggest, no matter what country is under investigation, when democracy and media are involved, the normative assumption is that infotainment will mean a decline in the quality of political discourse.

Not all scholars agree. Some suggest the fear may be worse than the facts (van Zoonen, 1998). By appealing to the less politically-interested citizen, they argue infotainment may actually improve knowledge in the electorate by giving them a point of access to the political process. Perhaps non-traditional sources actually provide additional means of judging candidates. One could argue citizens, journalists, and politicians should not limit themselves to the content of party programs and political

debate – that citizens can receive worthwhile information and make informed decisions based in part on information they obtain through non-traditional media sources:

> ...rational behavior is based on a theoretically and empirically questionable notion of citizens as information-hungry political animals. Voters decide not on a cognitive level alone but also on the basis of affective elements found in the personal qualities of the candidates. (Brants & Neijens, 1998, p. 163)

In fact, it could be that by personalizing the candidates and the political process, "new meanings will emerge in the lives of citizens" (Barnhurst, 1998, p. 203).

Need for Research:

Whether a dangerous or democratically-enhancing trend, it will be impossible for those concerned to decipher the impact of infotainment until researchers get to work studying this relatively new phenomenon.

> ...whether the populist groundswell will mainly be empowering or merely symbolic, mainly redemptive or corrosive for civic communication, could depend in the end on the aims of its producers and on how it is received by audiences – on both of which we badly need more and better research. (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 227)

As noted above, one of the key concern scholars and critics have regarding the issue, is the potential for decreasing participation (and increasing cynicism) among America's citizens. Among those who are apolitical, cynicism is the dominant mindset (van Zoonen, 1998). As van Zoonen reports, the majority of Americans have long-believed that government cannot be trusted to do the right thing. Citizens not only lack trust, they are increasingly concerned about the public marriage between government and big business, as well as with the media's emphasis on style rather than content. These things are driving people away from the political sphere into apathy (van Zoonen, 1998).

The Young Electorate:

Young people are, perhaps, the most cynical group among America's electorate. They commonly report being disillusioned with politicians and the political process. Many critics consider this group to be *the most* at risk in the "age of infotainment." More than any preceding generation, young people today have spent their entire lives ingesting a heavy diet of televised, mass-mediated messages. Many scholars who've studied this age group, find young citizens – more than ever –are disillusioned not only with politics, but also with traditional means of political communication, such as TV news:

> ... their own encounters with the medium taught them that the products of institutional journalism are largely irrelevant to their lives. This disillusionment is profound in the USA, where the process of redefining political journalism are developed to perhaps the most extreme extent. (Barnhurst, 1998, p. 203)

Many scholars (Barnhurst, 1998; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1998) say young people are seeking alternatives to traditional sources which give them direct access to a politician's message so they can form their own opinions, unmediated and unaided by journalists:

> The news stories that do catch their attention make the connection by including people their age or figures they encounter locally. This is why news is but one of many genres (especially entertainment media) they use to make sense of the political world. (Barnhurst, 1998, p. 216)

In his qualitative study of the role of media in the politicization of American youth, Barnhurst found – far from being dummies – young people are deeply committed to finding the truth about the political worlds they live in. Their sense of power, he says, does not draw from democratic theory. Instead, "they develop intense relationships with media contents and icons." (p.216)

THE 2000 COMEDY CAMPAIGN: A USES AND GRATIFICATIONS APPROACH

Much of the discussion surrounding infotainment in general, and the Pew Center's findings in particular, centers on the assumption that information which young people glean from non-traditional sources might affect their opinions about candidates (and possibly their voting behavior). Perhaps, for example, undecided young voters who continually hear jokes disparaging George W. Bush's intelligence might be swayed towards Vice President Al Gore. Or in another scenario, jokes characterizing Mr. Gore as being "stiff" might solidify a young Republican's plan to vote for Mr. Bush.

Is in not equally possible, however, that voters' opinions are *not* affected by their exposure to comedic sources? Some suggest they are simply seeking out sources which parallel (or conform to) already-existing perspectives. Given young people's often-reported discontent with the political system and its candidates, for example, one might logically believe young people are simply seeking out information which suits their individual needs and interests. In other words, young people who feel cynical about American politics may seek out sources which mock the political process and reinforce their cynical views.

The idea of seeking out (and using) media to satisfy one's needs and interests is not new. Dating from the early 1940s, and elaborated upon in the 1960s and 1970s (McQuail, 2000), theorists have focused attention on the social function of media use. In contrast to early communication research which focused on the "hypodermic" effects of media messages, the Uses and Gratifications approach reflects a desire to understand media effects in terms "more faithful to the individual user's own experience

and perspective" (Blumler, 1979, p. 10). Instead of asking: "What do media do to people," the central research question in the U&G tradition asks "What do people do with media?" (Swanson, 1979, p. 51) According to McQuail (2000), U&G researchers assume "media and content choice is generally rational and directed towards certain specific goals and satisfactions (thus the audience is active and audience formation can be logically explained)." (p. 387) The general premise – people choose media content and the medium itself, based on which needs they want to meet (and effects vary dependently). (For additional readings on the development of this research tradition, see also Blumler & Katz, 1974; Blumler, 1979; Lichtenstein & Rosenfeld, 1983; McDonald & Glynn, 1984; McQuail, 2000; Palmgreen, 1984; Ruggerio, 2000; Swanson, 1977; Swanson, 1979; Swanson; 1987).

Uses & Gratifications In a Television Age

Given that individual consumers selectively expose themselves to media of interest to them, it follows the majority of U&G research in the past two decades has focused on television. When compared to other media in its impact on modern American society, television is a giant among societal shapers (Cortes, 1992). Although life lessons from families, friends, and schools continue to affect us, "television has become our nation's most common and constant learning environment. (It) is the wholesale distributor of images and forms the mainstream of our popular culture" (Signorielli & Morgan, 1990, p. 13-14). Fontana (1988) calls television an integral part of American life:

> The medium helps shape our understanding of ourselves, our society, and our place in the world. Television is a major determinant of what citizens know about history, economics, political systems, social issues and interpersonal relationships. (p. 348)

Radio, newspapers, and magazines also disseminate cultural information, but television plays the dominant media role in America. People in this country spend more time with "the tube" than almost any other source of information. Signorielli and Morgan (1990) found "more time is spent watching television than doing anything else besides working and sleeping." (p. 14)

As a result of the role television plays in our society, U&G scholars have focused much attention on the medium (Bantz, 1982; Gantz, 1978; Rubin, 1983; Rubin & Perse, 1987). In general, researchers following this approach have searched for predictable links between amount of exposure, motivations for exposure, and effects. They logically expect to find the greatest effects among highly motivated, heavy consumers of media messages (Gantz, 1978). Over the years, dozens of factors have been identified as motivating people's exposure to various television programs. According to McQuail (2000), the most enduring movitvations affecting television viewers are: (1) surveillance – forms of information seeking; (2) diversion – escape from routine, achieve emotional release (including desire for entertainment); (3) personal relationships – need for companionship or as a means of connecting with society; and (4) personal identity – explore reality and find out where they "fit" in the world. (p. 388)

Social & Demographic Grouping: "Niche" Audiences

Over the years, the concept of personal and social "identity" has found purchase in many Uses and Gratifications studies. Not only does this approach focus on individual members of the audience, it often looks at these individuals as members of distinct social groups. Many researchers have sought to determine whether individuals choose to expose themselves to media messages based on group identity (Harwood,

1999; Johnsone, 1974; Lee and Brown, 1981; Stanford, 1984). Several of these studies have focused on so-called "niche" audiences, such as those who watch soap operas (Babrow, 1987; Greenberg & Woods, 1999), watch television re-runs (Furno-Lamude & Anderson, 1992), and seek out religious programming (Abelman, 1987; Abelman, 1989).

U&G in the Political Arena:

Since the early days of U&G research, communication scholars have suggested that combining functions and effects perspectives might be exceptionally fruitful in the political field (Blumler & McQuail, 1968; McQuail, 2000). In a recent experiment, Tewksbury (1999) found different objectives or motives for watching appear to affect how a person processes political messages. Those watching for diversion (as a way to pass the time) evaluated campaign messages differently than those watching for information. Viewers who were watching to evaluate campaign information were able to remember/recall more about a candidate's position on issues than those who were watching to pass the time. "Evaluators" were also more likely to discuss their thoughts about political issues with others. These findings suggest communication researchers need to be aware of a person's motivations for consuming media in order to study potential effects. Which brings us to the question at hand.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODOLOGY

In the present study, the author examined the 2000 Comedy Campaign taking a U&G approach, with several key questions in mind: Why are young people watching

late-night and politically oriented comedy shows in the first place? What are their motives and expectations for "tuning in"? Do their motives for watching affect what they take away from these shows? Are jokes featured on comedy programs likely to affect the opinions of young voters? Are young voters relying primarily on these shows for their campaign news, or are they learning about the candidates from other sources as well?

The author designed a survey instrument, replicating pertinent questions from the Pew Center study. She then added questions that might help expand on the Pew findings in a significant way. For example, among respondents who said they regularly or sometimes learned political information from non-traditional sources, the researcher asked respondents, "What is the main reason you watch these shows?" Respondents were also asked, "How likely are jokes about candidates or their campaigns to affect your opinion about the candidates?"

Given the author's resources, it was impossible to duplicate Pew's survey methodology in a way that would be equally generalizable to the U.S. population. Therefore, she conducted a smaller-scale, pilot study involving students at the University of Texas in Austin. In the week prior to the election (on November 7th), she and a research assistant conducted intercept surveys of 100 UT students at four locations on campus. The locations were chosen in an effort to provide a diverse sample of the student body, including graduate and undergraduate students who – because of their program of study – frequently walked through different geographical areas of campus (north, south, east, and west).

At each location, surveyors stopped every fifth passer-by in an effort at randomness. To participate, respondents were required to meet three criteria, including being a UT student, 18 or older, and an American citizen. More than three-quarters of the students surveyors stopped, participated in the study (24% either refused or were ineligible to participate). (Respondents were not required to be registered voters, although demographic data shows 93% reported being registered.)

Using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) the researcher ran a variety of statistical tests designed to replicate and advance the Pew Center's findings. Before discussing the findings, it is vital to admit a problem with the study. A research assistant lost 26 of the surveys before they could be coded and analyzed. So, not only was the sample size small to begin with. It became smaller as a result of this unexpected development. The resulting sample size is one of several methodological weaknesses associated with the present study. The author addresses additional weaknesses later, in the "Discussions" section of this paper. Inter-coder reliability on survey variables was 96%.

RESULTS

As discussed above, the following data was gathered using an intercept study. Despite efforts to randomize subjects selected for participation, results reported here are based on a non-random survey. However, by comparing demographic data in this sample to information provided by the University of Texas Office of Institutional Studies, the author is able to conclude the results are reasonably generalizable to the UT student body, with only four exceptions. As seen in Table 1, the study under-samples

women (by 9%), graduate students (by 10%), and Texas residents (by 5%), and over-samples seniors (by 8%).

TABLE 1:
Comparison of Study Demographics to UT Student Body Demographics

Demographic Group:	This Study:	UT Demographics:
Average Age	21.5	21.5 (undergraduate students) 23 (graduate students)
Gender:		
Male	60% (+10)	50%
Female	41% (-)	50%
Race/Ethnic Group:		
Caucasian	62% (-2)	64%
African-American	3%	3%
Hispanic/Latino	14% (+2)	12%
Asian-American	10% (-2)	12%
Other	12% (+3)	9%
Class:		
Freshman	16% (-1)	17%
Sophomore	18% (-2)	16%
Junior	20% (+3)	17%
Senior	34% (+8)	26%
Graduate	11% (-10)	21%
Home State:		
Texas Resident	75% (-5)	81%
Other	24% (+5)	19%
	n = 74	*n* = 50,000+

Comparing UT & Pew Findings:

The next several steps in our analysis involve comparing UT study results to the national results obtained by Pew researchers. First, a comparison of the sources of campaign news among young Americans is interesting. Table 2 shows more UT students report relying on television as an important source of campaign news (81%) than Pew respondents (76%). When it comes to particular types of television, UT

students are also more likely than Pew respondents to rely on cable and network news, but are less likely to watch local news than the national sample.

The number of UT students using the Internet as a source of political learning was also higher than Pew respondents, 22% and 9% respectively. The most dramatic difference, however, is in students' reported reliance on newspapers for campaign information. A staggering 70% of UT respondents say they use newspapers as one of two top sources, compared to only 21% in Pew's national survey. In fact, 26% of students interviewed in the present study reported using newspapers as their *primary* (or first) source of campaign news. This figure alone is higher than the total percentage reported by Pew.

TABLE 2:
Where Young People Go For Campaign News – A Comparison To Pew Center Results

Source of News:	UT Study:	Pew Study: (18-29 subgroup)
Television	83% (+7)	76%
Cable	38% (+7)	29%
Network	36% (+14)	22%
Local	21% (-6)	27%
Newspapers	70% (+49)	21%
Internet	22% (+13)	9%
Magazines	6% (+3)	3%
Radio	4% (-7)	11%
	n = 74	*n* = 233

* Categories do not add to 100% because two responses were accepted. Percentages for primary and secondary sources were added to create above totals.

When compared to Pew's key findings regarding learning from entertainment sources, our results were reasonably similar. 27% of UT respondents report "regularly"

learning about candidates or their campaigns from three non-traditional sources (MTV, Late-Night comedies, and politically-oriented comedies) compared to 24% of Pew study respondents. Compared to Pew respondents, UT students were somewhat less likely, however, to report learning "sometimes" from these sources (45% UT, 55% Pew respondents respectively). This means a slightly larger percentage of UT students say they "hardly ever" or "never" learned from these sources (see Table 3). Given all subjects in the present study had at least some college education, it is possible level of education played a part in these findings.

TABLE 3:
Learning from Entertainment Television – A Comparison of Present Study to Pew Center Results

Learning from Entertainment TV:	**UT Study:**	**Pew Study: (18-29 subgroup)**
Regularly	27% (+3)	24%
Sometimes	45% (-10)	55%
Hardly Ever/Never	28% (+7)	21%*
Total	100%	100%
	n = 74	*n* = 233

* The Pew Center's design included a response option for Don't Know/Refused. This author also included such a category in the survey instrument, but no respondents gave this response. For ease of comparison, the percentage of Pew respondents labled Hardly Ever/Never also includes respondents who answered Don't Know or Refused to answer.

Reasons for Watching Non-Traditional Media:

The author wanted to see what motivates young people to watch these sorts of shows. If respondents admitted "regularly" or "sometimes" learning from non-traditional sources, surveyors asked them "What is the main reason you watch these shows? The question was open-ended in order not to lead respondents toward possible politically-

oriented motivations. After giving their first response, respondents were probed for a second answer (a second answer was not required). Respondents gave a variety of answers, such as "because they're funny," "I like the jokes," "I want to see who they're making fun of," "there's nothing else on at that time," "to avoid doing homework."

When it comes to analyzing such data, previous studies on news and entertainment programming suggest viewers tend to fall into two or three categories of motivation (See: Gantz, 1978; Rubin, 1983; Rubin & Perse, 1987). Using these studies as a guide, the author categorized survey responses into one of three categories: Surveillance, Entertainment, and Diversion.

As seen in Table 4, 65% say their primary reason for watching non-traditional programming is Entertainment, followed by Diversion (20%) and Surveillance (16%). Only one respondent (of 52 who reported a primary reason for watching) was unable to be classified in one of these three categories. This single respondent represents <1% in the Other category.

TABLE 4:
Reasons for Watching Non-Traditional Media

Reasons for Watching:	Primary:	Secondary:
Entertainment	65%	30%
Diversion	20%	16%
Surveillance	16%	30%
Other	<1%	25%
	n = 52	*n* = 37

* Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

When it comes to the second reason for watching, the Surveillance factor increased dramatically (Table 4). The Other category also increased. In 9 of 37 cases, respondents say they watched for reasons such as: "I like everything on those channels," "the show looks interesting," "it catches my attention." These responses did not fall easily into either of the three key categories. The responses are included here for clarity. However, in further analyses, respondents falling into the Other category were eliminated so the author could focus solely on key motivations.

The author wanted to know whether respondents who report learning about politics regularly or sometimes from non-traditional, were likely to have different motivations for watching than respondents who learn from these sources less frequently. To test the question, the author first had to group respondents into categories based on frequency of learning from non-traditional programs (MTV, late-night shows, and politically-oriented comedies). Respondents were given 1 point for "regularly" learning, 2 for "sometimes learning, 3 for "hardly ever", and 4 points for "never" learning from each of these three sources. The author added respondents' scores together and ordered them by totals. Results show a logical split, with 49% (36 respondents) of respondents falling into the category of "heavy non-traditional learners" and 51% (38 respondents) into "light non-traditional learners".

Using these new groupings, the author conducted a Pearson Chi Square test analyzing subjects' reasons for watching (independent variable) by their new grouping of "heavy" and "light" (dependent variable). Analysis of *primary* reason for watching showed no significant results. However, when analyzing respondents' *second* reason for watching, the author found "heavy learners" are significantly more likely to be

watching for Entertainment, whereas "light learners" were more likely to be watching for Diversion ($p < .05$)(Table 5).

TABLE 5:
How Second Reason for Watching Relates to Amount of Non-Traditional Learning

AMOUNT OF LEARNING FROM NON-TRADITIONAL SOURCES:	SECOND REASON FOR WATCHING		
	Entertainment:	Diversion:	Surveillance:
Heavy	91%	33%	64%
Light	9%	67%	36%
	n = 11	*n* = 6	*n* = 11

(Pearson Chi-Square value = 6.049a, df = 2, p <.05)
* Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Results suggest incidental learning may be taking place. "Heavy Learners" say they are primarily watching for Entertainment, yet by the very nature of their grouping, they are also regularly learning from these non-traditional sources. Further investigation is necessary before the author can conclude incidental learning is, in fact, the reason for this finding. No further analysis on the topic is included in the present paper.

Based on democratic theory and critical concerns addressed earlier, the author *did* further investigate potential effects of jokes on respondents. Students were asked, "How likely are jokes to affect your *opinions* about the candidates or their campaigns?" Note the phrasing. Respondents were not asked how likely jokes were to affect their *vote*. Researchers asked the question of all survey respondents, regardless of whether they report learning about candidates from non-traditional sources. The overwhelming majority (74%) says jokes are not likely to affect their opinions (Table 6). However,

more than 1/4 of respondents said jokes were at least somewhat likely to affect their opinions about candidates or their campaigns.

TABLE 6:
Effect of Jokes on Opinions about Candidates or their Campaigns

Effect of Jokes:	
Not Likely	74%
Somewhat Likely	18%
Likely	8%
	n = 74

* Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Using the same grouping described earlier, the author found "heavy learners" are no more likely than "light learners" to report jokes affect their opinions.

However, additional tests analyzing a respondent's primary reason for watching non-traditional programs and the impact of jokes *does* show significant results. Again, most subjects report watching for Entertainment. However, those who watch primarily for Surveillance are nearly twice as likely as those who watch for entertainment (62% versus 33%) to say their opinions are (at least somewhat) affected by the jokes they hear (Table 7). Those who watch for Diversion say there is absolutely no change their opinions will be affected. In other words, the reasons young people watch non-traditional shows can have a profound effect on what they take away from the viewing experience.

TABLE 7:
How reasons for watching non-traditional shows affect impact of jokes

	REASON FOR WATCHING:		
IMPACT OF JOKES:	Entertainment	Surveillance	Diversion
Likely/Somewhat Likely	33%	62%	--
Not Likely	67%	38%	100%
	n = 33	*n* = 8	*n* = 10

(Pearson Chi-Square value = 8.231a, df = 2, p < .05)
* Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Finally, the author addresses the assumption that young people are relying on only non-traditional media as their primary source of campaign news. Again, a Pearson Chi Square test was employed to compare "heavy" versus "light" learners of non-traditional sources to respondents' reliance on more traditional media sources. Those who learn heavily from non-traditional sources are also significantly more likely (than "light" learners) to learn regularly from local television news ($p<.01$) and national network news ($p<.05$). (See Table 8). The researcher found no significant differences between "heavy" and "light" learners in other media categories, including cable news, daily newspapers, or the internet.

TABLE 8:
Percentage of Respondents Who Learn "Heavily" from Non-Traditional Programs Who Also Learn "Heavily" From Traditional TV News

	AMOUNT OF LEARNING FROM TRADITIONAL SOURCES:			
SOURCE:	**Regularly:**	**Sometimes:**	**Hardly Ever:**	**Never:**
Local TV News	47%	39%	11%	3%
National Network News	67%	22%	8%	3%

Local News: (Pearson Chi-Square value = 11.528a, df = 3, p<.01)
National Network News: (Pearson Chi-Square value = 9.022a, df = 3, p<.05)

Among other reasons, this finding is particularly significant because it de-bunks the assumption that young people are learning about politicians and their campaigns *primarily* through non-traditional sources. Instead, the results show heavy non-traditional learners are also relying regularly on other, more mainstream sources for their news and information. It appears young people who learn regularly from non-traditional sources, may simply be television media junkies – an assumption this author believes is far simpler to make, and far easier to defend.

DISCUSSION & SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This small, pilot study was designed to give researchers direction on how to study the role non-traditional sources play in the lives of young Americans. As a result, several issues have become increasingly clear. First, young viewers who report relying heavily on non-traditional programs as a means of learning about politics, are also learning from other televised sources. In short, children of the "television age" are seeking information from all available sources, not simply those mediated by journalists and other traditional information providers. An Art History major put it plainly when she said these shows give her "a break from trying to figure out if you're getting the truth or not." One student said comedians present information to him "in a way that's more accessible to me, being the age I am."

Second, we have determined that jokes can have an effect on young people. As many as ¼ of respondents say they're at least somewhat likely to have their opinions affected by jokes they hear about candidates. Further, this study found a person's motivations for watching non-traditional sources appear to affect what they take away

from their media experience. Those watching for information (Surveillance) are more likely to have their opinions affected than those seeking Entertainment.

Many questions remain unanswered, however. We know jokes have an impact on opinions. What we don't know is, how are opinions affected? Are new opinions being formed (or created) as a result of these jokes? Or are these jokes simply reinforcing existing opinions? This age group is known for its commonly-held, cynical views of the political process. Some researchers call it "cynical chic," where young citizens consider it cool to stand against the dominant political system. When it comes to holding cynical views, UT students are no exception. Many said they liked to see the system mocked. "I'm kind of sickened by politics and they tend to satirize it pretty well," "I like seeing the flaws they pick out," "I watch to see the candidates' latest faux pas," "They degrade politicians." They're "more open to making fun of both sides" were among the responses students gave for watching non-traditional programs.

Methodological Weakness:

Non-Random Study

Much has been accomplished here, but more research must be done to better understand the intricacies of young voters' minds and motivations. First and foremost, this study has a key methodological weakness. As discussed above, because the study was small and non-random, the findings are limited and therefore not generalizable to the U.S. population. In order to broaden the findings, researchers need to administer a random survey. It was also based on a very small sample of 74 respondents.

Criticisms of Uses and Gratifications:

In addition to this methodological weakness, over the years, countless scholars have criticized the Uses and Gratifications approach to communication research. According to Ruggerio, "paradoxically, U&G scholars may have been their own toughest critics" (Ruggerio, 2000, p. 11). Several problems have undermined its usefulness, including reliance on self-reporting (Ruggerio, 2000; Swanson, 1977; Swanson, 1987).

In U&G research, scholars try to find out what motivates a person to make specific media choices. To do this, they frequently ask respondents to report what needs they are seeking to fulfill, as was done in this study. But coming up with a list of gratifications sought can be extremely difficult (Becker, 1979; Carey & Kreiling, 1974). As Becker (1979) found in his study on voting behavior, the self-reporting approach to U&G research assumes: (1) the respondent is capable of providing answers to the questions regarding relevant gratifications; (2) people know which gratifications are important to them; (3) media consumers can verbalize their answers and will give honest answers. The overall lack of precision in reporting measures affects a researcher's ability to gather relevant data and reduces reliability and validity of U&G findings (McCleod & Becker, 1974, Becker, 1979).

Many scholars consider lack of clarity on central concepts, theoretical gaps, and cultural concerns to be additional weaknesses in the U&G tradition. The author will not discuss these criticisms here. However, she admits they also pose problems for researchers who take a Uses and Gratifications approach. (For further readings on these criticisms, see Blumler, 1979; Blumler & Katz, 1979; Carey & Kreiling, 1974;

Cazaneuve, 1974; Lichtenstein & Rosenfeld, 1983, McDonald & Glynn, 1984; Palmgreen, 1984, Ruggerio, 2000; Swanson, 1977; Swanson, 1979, Swanson, 1987).

Looking Ahead:

Despite the weaknesses cited above, the author believes the Uses and Gratifications approach is extremely helpful in the present situation. Information obtained through this study should be considered when discussing the "crisis in democracy" some critics claim is taking place in America. By determining what students expect to gain by watching comedic portrayals and candidate appearances on comedy shows, the author hopes this study will point toward a refined focus, as well as improved survey questions/methods in the future. In addition, the author hopes such a study will help media scholars, cultural critics, and social elites better understand the impact of infotainment on America's young citizens.

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